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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001122

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CHRISTIAN LEADERS VIEWS LAF COMMANDER SLEIMAN AS BEST OPTION FOR PRESIDENT

REF: BEIRUT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) National Liberal Party leader Dory Chamoun sees a two-year presidency under Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Sleiman as the only realistic option for resolving Lebanon's political crisis, and believes establishing the Special Tribunal before voting day will have a significant impact on the direction of the election. Regarding the August 5 parliamentary by-elections, Chamoun believes MP Michel Murr holds key. End summary.

PRESIDENCY: ONLY OPTIONS ARE AOUN, VACUUM...OR SLEIMAN

¶2. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief and Pol Specialist, hosted a lunch for Chamoun on July 26. Stressing that he "hates soldiers" and normally would oppose a military man in Baabda Palace, Chamoun nevertheless said that Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Sleiman was only option to avoid either an Aoun (whom he described as "clinical") presidency or a total vacuum. Sleiman is the only one who can keep the army unified, thereby denying Hizballah the opportunity to try to divide it. LAF unity is extremely important for a "country in rebirth," Chamoun said.

¶3. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's concerns that some reports indicate that Sleiman still maintains close ties with the Syrians, Chamoun said, "look at what he's done, not what he's saying." Sleiman is the "guy who kept the army together" at Nahr al-Barid, he added. He is the one who defied Syrian orders to use the LAF to break up pro-independence demonstrations in spring 2005, including the original March 14 rally. He agreed that Sleiman should be limited up front to a two-year term to leave the window open for a new candidate should he not be up to the job. But Sleiman is the only candidate who the opposition can accept who would be able to directly challenge Aoun's claim to the presidency.

TRIBUNAL IS KEY TO AVOIDING PRO-SYRIAN PRESIDENT

¶4. (C) Chamoun, asking about the status of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon, stressed that it needs to be

established before the September 25 presidential election. Otherwise, he warned, the pro-Syrian opposition will view it as a lame threat and continue their efforts to take control of the presidency. The Ambassador countered that the Tribunal already is a reality; the GOL, by submitting candidates for Tribunal judges and the Deputy Prosecutor, has fulfilled nearly all of its responsibilities, and should make this clear to the Lebanese people. Chamoun continued to press, saying that if the Tribunal processed even one round of indictments before the election, it would pose a stern warning to the opposition.

MICHEL MURR: THE "HERO" OF METN

¶15. (C) While making his own distaste for the man clear, Chamoun said Michel Murr holds the key to the August 5 by-elections in Beirut's Metn districts, widely viewed as a referendum on Aoun's presidential prospects (septel). To convince Murr to direct his constituency (which consists of a mish-mash of Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and other communities that hold the swing vote in what is expected to be a close election between Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement candidate Camille Khoury and former President Amine Gemayel, father of slain MP Pierre Gemayel) to vote in favor of Gemayel, Chamoun advocated appealing to Murr's ego and ambitions. As former Deputy Speaker, Murr already has achieved the highest position possible for a Greek Orthodox under Lebanon's complicated confessional system. Therefore, Chamoun said, pitch to Murr a vision of his political future as national reconciliator, the one person who can mend the fences between Lebanon's embittered factions.

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¶16. (C) If Murr tries to divide his votes between the two camps, it won't function on the ground; Murr needs to take a strong stance one way or another to have the Armenians follow him. If instead Murr stays out of the race, Chamoun said, Gemayel will win because the Armenians will vote for Gemayel, and March 14 can capitalize on the sympathy vote for the father of a slain young MP.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Dory Chamoun is no slouch when it comes to March 14 credentials: somewhat idiosyncratic in approach and head of a National Liberal Party that is only a shadow of its 1950s-1970s size, Chamoun has nevertheless been a consistently forceful and courageous critic of Syria and Hizballah. Rather than worry about his (largely non-existent) Christian base, he is one of the few Maronite politicians who has the temerity to attack Michel Aoun directly on national television for Aoun's alliance with Hizballah and his dalliances with pro-Syrian politicians. So we were surprised that he volunteered that the Michel Sleiman two-year presidency is an option he would favor. While Chamoun made it clear that he sees Sleiman as the least bad option available, he did not dismiss him -- as many of our contacts are wont to do -- as simply an Emile Lahoud clone. In our view, there remains a distinct Syrian odor, fainter on some days than others (with its strength no doubt linked to the political winds) that clings to Sleiman. But Chamoun seems to think that it is better to hold our nose than risk losing the presidency to a vacuum or to someone more solidly in Syria's clutches.

FELTMAN